

VOICE OF GOD FROM THE GRAVE.

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A.

SERMON,

OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH OF



MRS. ELIZA HARRIMAN,

WHO DIED SUDDENLY, MAY THE 29TH, 1853,

AGED EIGHTEEN YEARS.

BY WM. M. THAYER,

PASTOR OF THE ORTHODOX CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
ASHLAND, MASSACHUSETTS.

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1853.

Mrs. Harriman died during her pastor's absence at the West. This accounts for the fact that the sermon was not preached until two months after her decease. In the circumstances, the friends desired that the funeral services should consist of Prayer and Reading of the Scriptures, performed by Deacon Seaver, who is the Superintendent of the Sabbath School with which the deceased was connected; with singing by the choir; and that a more public notice of her death should be deferred until the return of the pastor.

S E R M O N .

Psalm lx. 6.

GOD HATH SPOKEN IN HIS HOLINESS.

ALTHOUGH the solemn event which claims our attention this afternoon may have lost some of its impressiveness by the intervention of weeks, yet, it is meet that we should tarry here and listen to the VOICE OF GOD as it comes to us in the memories of the departed. For it is not blind Fatality or Chance that has spoken to us in this afflictive providence, but "GOD HATH SPOKEN IN HIS HOLINESS." "Affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground." "The Lord gave and the Lord taketh away: blessed be the name of the Lord."

To aid me in the design of this discourse, you, my hearers, will recall the sadness and gloom which spread over this village on the last Sabbath morning of May, as the tidings were borne from family to family that our friend was no more. A cloud suddenly darkening the sun of that beautiful morning, and pouring down hail and fire upon the budding and fragrant earth, would not have surprised you more. Had disease been gradually wasting her strength away, so that friends and neighbors had often said of her, "she must die," the sad intelligence would have fallen upon your ears with less surprise. But, dying "in her full strength," before alarm had scarcely been awakened in the hearts of kindred, and when the promise of life was so fair and brilliant, it was unexpected and startling as a sunset in the morning. Was it a Sabbath of unusual solemnity? Did you come to this house of God with sadness of heart? Did the angel of death seem to be hovering over your quiet home? Were the young more thoughtful, and did they walk the street in more pensive mood? It were not strange if all this, and more, characterized that day. — Though absent from the scene myself, yet, I can appreciate in

some degree the general surprise and gloom occasioned by the decease of one whose life was so promising, and whose death so sudden.

Then imagine yourselves back to the experience of that day. The sun has risen in his glory. The stillness of the Sabbath reigns over hill and dale. There is peace and joy in all your habitations. You know not that any one of your number is near the gates of death. You are preparing to worship God in his sanctuary. You entertain few thoughts of death. The blooming season of the year, your felicitous relations, the promising future, are all calculated to exclude this solemn theme from your minds. But, in the height of your prosperity, the announcement comes, that your friend and neighbor, the wife, daughter, sister, and now youthful mother, is dead. How great a change! You remember her only in the bloom of health. You think of her only as the last one to be called so early away. But she has nevertheless fallen suddenly, and almost unconscious of a pang, into the sleep of death. With all her loveliness, with her quiet and gentle spirit, her youthful promise and hopes, she has gone.

" So fades a summer cloud away ;
 So sinks the gale when storms are o'er ;
 So gently shuts the eye of day ;
 So dies a wave along the shore."

Such a providence, conveys numerous and affecting lessons to the living. "GOD HATH SPOKEN IN HIS HOLINESS." And before the impressions of this solemn event are effaced by the cares and business of the world, we will ponder some of the Divine lessons which it plainly teaches.

HUMAN FRAILTY. Surely, with such an illustration of the truth before us, we must feel the force of the declaration, "As for man his days are as grass. As a flower of the field, so he flourisheth." In lingering disease man appears to struggle with the great destroyer. But when he falls at a single blow, how frail he seems! When he dies before he is shorn of his strength, and without a warning, what an example of impotence! We can scarcely realize that he is gone. Thus sudden death becomes a most faithful teacher of human frailty.

Hence, the solemn providence, through which God has recently spoken to us, is admonitory in this regard. The deceased was called away without a warning. She was doubtless in the spirit-land before she thought of dying. She had not time to utter a parting word. One hour the prospects of life were fair, the next she was in eternity. The living had not time to

inform her of her situation. They had not time to prepare their own mind for her sudden departure. She was taken—from scenes of conjugal affection and social bliss, from her pleasant home and loving friends, taken—and no time to say farewell. What a change for a mortal to experience! So lately planning for future life, so full of hope and promise, her eye beaming with the radiance of inward happiness, her heart beating high with anticipated delight, but now passing almost instantaneously into the eternal world! This hour her countenance illumined with the light of love and intelligence, the next pallid and ghastly in the embrace of death! It seems like a dream, and yet it is reality—a reality which any one of us is liable to experience. For “our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.” “We all do fade as a leaf.”

THE HOPES OF THE YOUNG ARE NOT TOO BRIGHT TO FADE. If the prospect of life is more flattering to one class of persons than another, that class is the young. And it really appears from facts that there is a fairer chance of life to those whose ages range from twelve to twenty years, than to any other persons. This circle is less frequently entered by death, as the experience of every pastor will testify. Of sixty deaths which have occurred among this people during my ministry, this is the first between the ages named above. As the life-loving youth contemplates this fact he might be inclined to place undue attachment upon the world as almost pledged to him for a series of years for his inheritance. But now that God has invaded his ranks, and so suddenly cut down one whose chance of life a short time since was even better than that of many others, he cannot lay the flattering unction to his soul that he shall long survive. That deserted hearth-stone, that vacant seat, that new-made grave, all are eloquent with warning.

“Yes, when the morning of her years was brightest,
That youthful presence into dust went down;
While yet with rosy dreams her rest was lightest,
Death, for the olive, wove the cypress crown.”

And you, young hearer, may stand by that mortal dust and learn a lesson which may greatly modify your views of life. To you “God hath spoken” in a voice which a thousand trumpets could not drown. Before, he spoke only by his written word; now, he speaks by the visible *act*. You have seen him illustrate and prove many startling texts by this single death. “There is but a step between me and death.” “Ye know not what shall be on the morrow.” “For what is your life?

It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." As you miss your deceased friend from social circles, or hereafter pause in yonder graveyard to read the inscription upon the stone that marks her resting-place, may the recollection of her sudden death enforce the lesson anew, that THE HOPES OF THE YOUNG ARE NOT TOO BRIGHT TO FADE. Thus may your earth-born desires be suppressed or regulated, your preparation for an exchange of worlds be wisely made.

HOW UNCERTAIN AND TRANSIENT IS THE CONJUGAL RELATION! One year ago this day, I united in marriage the couple whom this recent dispensation of Providence has separated. The conjugal relation is seldom consummated with fairer prospects of continuance than was this. Brighter visions of domestic bliss never delighted a newly wedded pair. Life appeared to open before them in its most inviting realities, and all along its pathway nought was seen but the bloom of flowers. A voice from heaven, proclaiming the change that would bewrought in a single year, would scarcely have broken the dream of future happiness. A sudden rending of the veil that conceals futurity, with the awful allotment bursting upon our view, could alone have dissipated our pleasing reflections as we looked upon this pair at the hymeneal altar. But time and experience (alas, how brief!) have enforced the lesson which a miracle only could have made us learn before. To-day we realize that the dearest earthly relation may be sundered in a moment, and the sweetest enjoyment prove evanescent as the morning vapor. An alliance which man cannot "put asunder" without incurring guilt is broken when yielding its truest bliss! A home is made dark when a new light has just risen upon it! A heart is pierced through and through with anguish when anticipating a more rapturous delight!

There are years of human experience of more eventful interest than others, but none into which are crowded so much of joy and sorrow as that whose opening chapter is marriage, and its closing one death. Its mingled hope and disappointment, pleasure and pain, delight and sadness, smiles and tears, in unexpected and mournful proportions. It is such an experience as would appal the spirit were it to have a prospective view of the reality. Year of more thrilling interest than all the previous years of life. Year of affecting change, casting its darkling shadows over the future, and throwing backward a sombre hue upon the past! Year of years, whose record is never blotted from the tablet of the heart!

With what considerate and serious views ought this relation of life to be entered! If such vicissitudes may be incident to

it in a single year, it magnifies into a matter of solemn character. For, the relation is usually entered with the most ardent affections, so that its rupture is attended with greater sorrow. The truth ought to impress those who are on the eve of consummating such a union. Instead of adding permanently to their happiness, it may speedily bring afflictions of unprecedented severity. It may be an era in the life of the surviving companion, but it is an era of consuming grief. With such an illustration of this truth as we have before us there is no need of multiplying proofs or appeals.

How faithfully husband and wife ought to meet respective obligations! Their plighted vows create great responsibilities, and very soon one or the other may be ushered into that world where the issue will be met. Not alone for the sake of the departed, but also, for the sake of the living, mutual fidelity ought to characterize both parties in the wedded-life. No regrets can be more painful than those which are experienced by the faithless in these sacred bonds. To follow a companion to the grave while the soul is oppressed with the consciousness of neglecting or wronging him or her, this must be a more bitter experience than the bereavement itself. When we linger by the coffin or tomb of some beloved friend, memory is busy in retracing the past, and recalling every word, and act, and emotion, inconsistent with the relation that has subsisted between us. If possible, we would blot forever from the past every record of injury and wrong which we have inflicted, that with hands washed in innocency, we may weep over the lifeless remains. Doubly true is this of unfaithfulness in the conjugal relation—a fact that reads an important lesson to all in the bonds of wedlock.

Thus does God speak to the married by this recent and melancholy death. If one actually knew that to-morrow, next week, or next month, his companion would die, with what scrupulous regard would he utter every word, and perform every act! Does not God declare by the death of this youthful wife, that such an event *may* occur in any household? Who can say, "the experience will not be mine"? What husband, what wife, may not be called before another week has elapsed, to a like bereavement? Then let it not prove vain that God hath spoken.

THE VOICE OF GOD in this bereavement also enforces the injunction, REMEMBER THY CREATOR IN THE DAYS OF THY YOUTH. The deceased united with this church at the early age of twelve. A few months previous she was made sensible

of her state as a sinner, and after a season of conviction, gave her heart to the Lord. It usually demands some Christian fortitude for the young to leave the gay circles of youth, and make a public profession of religion. But our friend discharged this duty as soon as her pastor made it clear, and for nearly six years enjoyed the fellowship of this church.

It is ever a matter of interest to know with what feelings the professing Christian meets "the last enemy." Gladly would we record some expressions of holy resignation and triumph, but, as you have learned already, death came too suddenly to allow the utterance. It would have been pleasant, especially to mourning relatives, to have seen her descend to the grave, conscious of her departure, and able to express her feelings in view of the expected change. But God, for reasons known to himself, ordered that she should pass unconsciously to the "Silent Land."

We may stand where her body reposes, and disturb our hearts with sad regrets, that she was not permitted to bear her dying testimony to the blessedness of a Christian hope. With "the weeping prophet" we may turn to God inquiringly, "Let me talk with thee of thy judgments." But it becomes us to lay our finger upon our mouth, and take that delightful view which her religious profession sanctions, and rejoice that she gave her heart to God while young. We would believe that if God had sloped her pathway to the tomb with protracted illness, and with conscious step she had entered the valley of death, she would have borne faithful witness to the preciousness of grace in Christ. Over the gloom of that eventful Sabbath morning we would throw the radiance of the sweet reflection, that her HOPE was an ample passport to realms of Light. For all the tears and regrets which the death occasions we would bear the poet's consolation,

"But when the sun, in all his state,
Illumed the Eastern skies;
She passed through Glory's morning gate,
And walked in Paradise."

The path of early piety is the only path of safety. It is perilous not to "remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth," Had the subject of these remarks neglected to seek Christ early, and been so suddenly cut down by death, the event would have been vastly more afflictive. Should a similar removal from earthly scenes become the lot of some of the youth before me, the sorrow occasioned by the bereavement would admit of little alleviation. May God spare you the dreadful experience. May you be admonished by this melan-

choly death to *seek the Lord while he may be found, and to call upon him while he is near.*

“Be wise to-day; ’tis madness to defer.”

The severest discipline of this providence is to you who are thus early and mysteriously bereft of your chosen companion. Doubtless you have found much that is dark and incomprehensible in these “ways of the Lord.” You have felt by a new and painful experience the force of such scripture-texts as the following: “Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known.” “How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!” But remember thou, that God “hath spoken IN HIS HOLINESS”! Not in vindictive wrath or unjust discipline! Not in lack of mercy, nor in the absence of unsullied purity! But “IN HIS HOLINESS” he hath spoken! In the glory of his perfect love, and justice, and mercy, and equity, and all his divine perfections, he has spoken! “Darkness and judgment” may surround his throne, but He is just as pure and holy, and loving now as when he smiled upon your nuptial bands. Much of mystery may characterize His dealings, but “it is the GLORY of God to conceal a thing.” His character is more exalted, and He sits upon His throne infinitely more “the high and holy One that inhabiteth eternity” for moving in a “mysterious way.” For this He is vastly more worthy of our homage, and without it he could not be God. To you, therefore, the foundation of solace lies in the fact, that “God hath spoken IN HIS HOLINESS.”

We would gladly bind up your bleeding heart, but for such affliction as yours there is no ample solace save at the fountain of Infinite Grace. This world, now to you so desolate, is doubtless barren beyond your former views in respect to sources of consolation. Looking downward, all is dark and dreary. Looking upward, you catch the beams of celestial hope. The light of your dwelling is extinguished, but the presence of Christ is both light and life. *Lover and friend is put far from you*, but the Savior is left. Your heart has an awful void, but Grace can fill it. Your spirit sinks under the burden of sorrow, but God can sustain you. The sun of life is darkened, clouds gather, billows roll; but the storm may bear you “nearer home.” Then, in the beautiful language of Dr. Patrick, accommodated to our purpose in respect to gender, I would add, “Think of the time past and rejoice that thou didst find such a friend. Imagine not how long thou mightest have enjoyed her, but think how long thou didst.

It was but natural to love her ; but it was supernatural to enjoy her. All persons are born to die, but all are not born to live so long before they die. Therefore, he that hath a friend, and hath her so long, is to acknowledge that God is very much his Friend. . . . When you are apt to fetch a sigh, and say, O, my dear friend is gone ! call it in again, and say, Thanks be to God that I had such a one to lose."

To the deeply afflicted parents, brothers, and sister of the deceased, I can address myself in no language more appropriate and consoling than that of the same writer quoted above. "Thus may you comfort yourselves : Our friend is not gone forever, but gone before : She is separated from us, but not lost. She is absent, but not dead. She hath taken a journey into a far country, and there we may go to see her. What matter is it whether our friend return to us, or we go to her ? None but this—that if she be in a better place, then it is better that we go to her, than that she come to us. Should we not desire to be better ourselves, and not to have her made worse ? Then let us contentedly follow as fast as we can, hoping there, where she is, to embrace again. We cannot expect her in our house, but she may expect us in hers. She cannot come down to us, but we may go up to her. She cannot come back, but we may follow after. . . . She was not ours, but was given us by God ; or rather, she was not given, but only lent. We had not the property, but only the use. We have not lost anything that was our own, but only restored that which was another's. And, therefore, now that she is taken away, we are not to be angry that God requires his own, but to be thankful that he has lent us so long that which was none of our own. . . . It is an excellent saying of Seneca, "I ever think of my friends with joy ; for I had them as if I should lose them, and I have lost them as if I had them." If we could but think of them as dying while they are alive, then we should more easily think of them as alive when they are dead. If we could be willing to part with them when we have them, we should think that we have them when we have parted with them."

Beloved Brethren of the Church ! If the young are stricken down in our ranks, what uncertainty lurks in the path of the aged, and those in the meridian of life ! Let this providence serve to bring us with increased fidelity to the altar of God, that we may catch its hallowed fire, and in the light of the sacred flame advance to the home of the contrite and broken-hearted wanderer. Soon we shall mingle in the scenes

which have already become a part of our Christian sister's experience, and it becomes us to have our lamps trimmed and burning for the bridegroom's coming.

Listen, all, to the VOICE OF GOD FROM THE GRAVE. The solemn accents dying away upon your ears unheeded will grow to mighty thunderings and wailings in another world. Life hangs upon a brittle thread. Time flies on swiftest wing. Death is at your doors. The grave opens at your feet. Heaven invites. Hell threatens. The Savior entreats. With you all it is Eternal Life or Death.

